

Strengthening Families:

A Preliminary Report Regarding
Youth Violence on the South Coast

by Carl Gutiérrez-Jones

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ABOUT LA CASA DE LA RAZA

La Casa de la Raza was founded in 1971 to provide a non-profit community center on the Eastside of Santa Barbara. The mission of La Casa de la Raza is to develop and empower the Latino community by affirming and preserving the Latino cultural heritage, by providing an umbrella for services and by advocating for participation in the larger community.

ABOUT THE CHICANO STUDIES INSTITUTE

Established in 1969, the Chicano Studies Institute at UC Santa Barbara facilitates interdisciplinary and field-specific research as scholars and students from all disciplines pursue work that helps policy makers, fellow researchers, educators, service providers and the interested public better understand the most pressing issues pertaining to Chicana/o and Latina/o populations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl Gutiérrez-Jones is a Professor of English at UC Santa Barbara and Director of the Chicano Studies Institute. He received his Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1990. His research interests include perceptions of legal interactions and criminality in Latino communities. He has lived in Santa Barbara with his wife and two daughters since 1990.

Overview

As the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury noted in its June 16, 2008 report on anti-gang efforts, approximately 90% of South Coast gang activity involves Latinos. This situation compels a thorough analysis of the factors that contribute to gang formation in local Latino communities. As regards youth violence prevention, research directs our attention to Latino families in particular, not because these families are inherently deficient or dysfunctional, but rather because they may be strongly impacted by economic hardship and may be underserved by local institutions. When asked what is appealing about gang participation, the youths who are involved frequently cite qualities that children would normally seek through family interactions, including feelings of belonging, protection and trust. As this report demonstrates, many local leaders who work closely with the Latino communities on the South Coast believe that strengthening Latino families will need to be a top priority if we are to make headway in preventing youth violence. In response, this report suggests that anti-gang programs and services be initiated, maintained and evaluated with this priority in mind.

This report collects the thoughts of fifty local leaders, program administrators, and service providers, all of whom were asked to offer their ideas regarding how to reduce gang violence, and how to more productively engage Latino families in the process. The responses have been synthesized into eight categories in the “Observations and Analysis” section below. As has been the case with most of the local gang violence analyses generated recently, the participants in this project cited a need for better coordination of programs, and a need for sustained, institutionalized support for violence prevention

efforts. The discussions of the fifty participants were unique because of their focus on the role of the family. Ten preliminary recommendations were extrapolated from these exchanges:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Develop and extend early intervention programs that focus on Latino children and their families;***
- 2) Develop and extend after-school and extra-curricular programming targeting Latino youths;***
- 3) Develop programs strengthening the communication between parents and the schools; design these programs in response to needs assessments engaging the parents;***
- 4) Develop an employment program for at-risk, underserved youths and build into this program training and mentorship components that will help the youths successfully meet employer expectations;***
- 5) Involve the City, the County, the Police Departments and the Sheriff's Office in creating a team that would work with parents to refer or provide services and counseling immediately in the wake of arrests and searches;***
- 6) Devote additional resources to strengthening the relations between law enforcement officials and Latino communities, with the goal of building greater trust and cooperation;***
- 7) Create and sustain organizations that can function as effective alternatives to gangs;***
- 8) Develop mentoring programs that focus on the children and their families;***
- 9) Support events and programs that empower the Latino community, and Latino families specifically;***
- 10) Examine and, where appropriate, revise substance abuse and mental health efforts, focusing on accessibility issues and the cultural appropriateness of programs.***

Introduction:

Local gang violence is worsening and the South Coast stands at an important threshold. Thus far, the violence has been largely limited to knife attacks and the use of other “hand-to-hand” weapons. The prevalence of gun use by gangs in nearby communities stands as a stark warning regarding how quickly the violence could escalate on the South Coast. One need only imagine the July 4th gang melee in Santa Barbara with gunfire to see how a horrible event could have been even more devastating. Critically important efforts have been undertaken to engage a core of approximately eighty-six “most at risk” youth in the City of Santa Barbara, but broader interventions, in the City and across the South Coast, must supplement this work. The recent gang-related killings on the South Coast indicate that children with minimal or no police records may participate in the most violent gang-related acts. Research confirms that children very much on the periphery of gangs may undertake extreme acts in “opportunistic” attempts to earn gang respect. In sum, the South Coast needs to reach a broad population of children who will not be readily identifiable through police or probation records. Further, engaging these children without simultaneously working to strengthen their families would ultimately undercut the violence prevention efforts. Based on the needs assessment conducted with the local leaders, there is strong support for the notion that the families of “at-risk” children need to be empowered. In addition, the participants suggest that support for the families be guided by careful needs assessments conducted with the parents and with the youths.

Early intervention focusing on families and their interactions with the schools is becoming all the more urgent as data regarding academic achievement indicates a deeply troubling disaffection of Latino students, a disaffection that snowballs as the students move along in their K-12 education. One sign of this disaffection from education may be found in the disturbing drop-out data for Latinos in California. For example, the 2002 high school graduation rate for Latinos in California was estimated at 60% (2005 Harvard University study). The language accessibility of programs and other cultural factors significantly impact Latino family participation in pre-school activities, and in parent-school collaborations generally. These issues need to be addressed if we are to convince children that they have compelling alternatives to gang life if they achieve in school.

One standout feature of the gang-related violence is its consistent reproduction of Latino-on-Latino victimization. Knowledge of the cultural dynamics at work in Latino communities proves invaluable when analyzing this tendency and designing prevention strategies. In the City of Santa Barbara, this tendency frequently unfolds as a complicated Eastside versus Westside territorial battle. While interviews with gang participants confirm that they seek status and belonging by pursuing acts that, in the eyes of the gang, demonstrate commitment to the group, research also reveals an awareness among at least some of the participants that they are lashing out at mirror images of themselves.

Interviews conducted by Professor Victor Rios (Sociology, UCSB) with local gang-involved youth reveal that most of the participants perceive themselves as experiencing regular racial discrimination. In such a context, aggressive action by some Latino youths to claim and protect social status, especially among fellow Latinos, is to

some degree predictable. But even in situations where the internalization of racism might appear to affect behavior significantly, crucial questions remain: why do some youths react to discrimination by turning to gangs while most do not? What familial factors combine with experiences of discrimination to facilitate gang violence towards those who look the same? Ultimately, a host of socio-cultural dynamics require attention as we consider gang-related violence. Additional needs assessments, conducted with the youths and their families, will offer a valuable means of engaging these socio-cultural dynamics, and should serve as guides to future program development and evaluation.

Methodology

This preliminary report is the fruit of discussions that have taken place over the course of one year (November 2007 – November 2008). These discussions have involved leaders and service providers from a wide variety of City, County and community-based organizations that work with Latino youths and their families. The participants were selected by a steering committee that included the following members: Salud Carbajal (First District Supervisor, County of Santa Barbara); Lorenzo Duarte (Sergeant, Santa Barbara Police Department); Michael Gonzalez (Director of Compliance and Categorical Programs, Santa Barbara School Districts); Carl Gutiérrez-Jones (Director, Chicano Studies Institute, UC Santa Barbara); Raquel López (Executive Director, La Casa de la Raza); Marisela Marquez (Executive Director, Associated Students, UC Santa Barbara); Victor Rios (Professor of Sociology, UC Santa Barbara); Cuco Rodriguez-Rodriguez (Program Manager, Mental Health Services Act Administration, County of Santa Barbara); and Camerino Sanchez (Chief of Police, Santa Barbara Police Department).

This steering committee selected the symposia participants based on their extensive experience with, and cultural understanding of, Latino communities. Many of the participants were administrators in their organizations, which included the County Mental Health Department, the County Probation Department, the Santa Barbara School Districts, the Santa Barbara Police Department, Zona Seca, La Casa de la Raza, the University of California at Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara City College, Los Compadres, the County Education Office, local schools, local churches, and numerous additional organizations. Select external contributors also participated in the discussions, including Jerry Tello, a nationally recognized expert in Latino youth violence, and Nancy Hernandez, a co-founder of Homies, Inc., a largely self-supporting, youth-organized gang violence prevention program in San Francisco's Mission District. The discussions with the 50 participants were undertaken with the explicit goal of producing innovative ideas regarding youth violence prevention in light of the crucial role played by families.

The fifty symposia participants submitted their individual recommendations in advance of an initial day-long symposium (held on April 10, 2008), and these proposals were then used to define core concerns that were taken up by small and larger group discussions. Undertaking several rounds of plenary and break-out discussions during the second of the symposia (held on June 20, 2008), the participants repeatedly refined their assessments.

This preliminary report represents a synthesis of this work, and was made available for further comments to the participants while in draft form. The report is described as preliminary because it marks the first of three steps. Having developed a needs assessment based on a broad sampling of local leadership and service providers,

the principal co-organizers of this effort -- La Casa de la Raza and UCSB's Chicano Studies Institute -- plan to facilitate complementary assessments based on interactions with Latino youth and with their families.

Observations and Analysis

I. Early Intervention

The ages of children committing serious gang-related crimes is dropping. At the same time, many Latino children are starting behind their non-Latino peers when they enter school, and that achievement gap frequently widens as the children move through the grades. In addition, the achievement gap appears to contribute to general disaffection from school. Gang aspirations can easily fill the void when the long-term benefits of education appear out of reach. Given this context, steps need to be taken to strengthen family involvement with schools (including pre-schools) from the moment the children enter formal education. Children whose parents are involved in school tend to achieve better, and have higher graduation rates. Such efforts to connect families and schools would be greatly assisted by the expansion of Spanish-language programs that inform Latino parents about the services available to them. A long tradition of families helping families exists in Latino communities, and this strength could be tapped by programs providing information and resources to parent networks. In addition, efforts should be undertaken to sustain these family networks as the children proceed through the grades. The programs described here could be thought of as providing educational counseling for families who are learning how to negotiate the schools and their expectations. To be

effective, this type of program might be institutionalized, possibly as partnerships between the schools and community-based organizations.

II. Education

The City and local schools have recently created a “liaison” position that is working as a critical bridge between the schools and some of Santa Barbara’s most “at-risk” and most under-served youth. At the same time, most of the gang-related killings that have taken place in Santa Barbara recently have apparently been committed by children who would not have been identified as “most at-risk” according to current criteria being articulated by the City. In sum, there is an urgent need to extend the efforts already underway. In this vein, more resources should be devoted to after-school and extra-curricular programming developed by agencies that have undertaken needs assessments to ensure that they are neither duplicating efforts nor missing already under-served families. Greater support should also be made available for teachers who are spending considerable contact time with these youths. Along these lines, additional in-service training regarding strategies for addressing the achievement gap and student disaffection should be provided to interested K-12 teachers.

Although the fact has not received much media attention, girls are also heavily involved in gang activities and gang-related violence. Recent research being conducted by Professor Laura Romo (Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, UCSB) has demonstrated the crucial role that mother/daughter communication plays in Latina health education. The models explored in this research might be adapted for pilot programs addressing underserved “at-risk” Latinas.

III. Employment

Gang-involved youth need to see a concrete, accessible alternative before they can be expected to break their ties with gangs. Employment is one crucial means for addressing this need. But youths who have not been acculturated to the expectations of employment will need additional assistance, both before and after they have gained employment. A youth apprenticeship program could help meet these needs. To facilitate participation, applications should be streamlined. The application process itself could also be made an opportunity for counseling and education. On-the-job mentors also play a key role in the success of such programs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many public and private employees who would like to participate as mentors. The effort would require robust coordination among the youths, their families, potential employers, and counselors. The City's Community Centers could be an excellent home for these efforts.

IV. Enforcement

Law enforcement is a crucial tool in fighting gang-related violence, but to be effective, any police department needs the trust and cooperation of the communities that they serve. Concrete steps can be taken to reinforce this relationship locally, thereby enhancing both enforcement and crime prevention. In this vein, the City might create a "crisis team" that could accompany the police as they undertake gang-related searches and arrests in homes. Frequently, multiple family members witness such interactions with police, including younger siblings of the youths who are the focus of the action. If a small team could participate, including members who could effectively communicate information

regarding the services available to the family, the interaction could provide a crucial opportunity to assist families in need. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that families in this situation are frequently eager for assistance.

Additional informal contact between the officers and the community could help reinforce trust and cooperation. In this vein, some police departments have experimented with “adopt-a-cop” programs, where families agree to involve officers in a wide variety of activities, thereby building lasting relationships. Something similar could be accomplished by creating affordable housing for officers in Latino neighborhoods.

V. Fostering Alternative Forms of Youth Affiliation

Children seeking familial qualities need viable forms of affiliation that can act as alternatives to the gangs. Strengthening traditional families would play a key role in this regard, but other forms of “familial” affiliation can also serve as a catalyst for “at-risk” youth who seek change. Community-based organizations can function in this manner, channeling creative energies and help foster participation in projects addressing social issues and inequities that impact Latino communities. In this vein, youth groups organized around social issues have worked as effective alternatives to gangs. Such groups require resources and administrative support, but here again the success of the efforts is largely tied to developing projects that speak to needs identified by the participants.

VI. Mentoring

Mentoring programs for gang-involved youth may focus too narrowly on the children. Experience and research tell us that some of the most successful interventions address the families as well. With these facts in mind, energies should be directed toward developing more programs that mentor families. Such programs should be developed in response to thorough needs assessments. Goals should include the sustainability of mentoring relations, and the development of peer-to-peer mentoring. Given the crucial potential played by families in preventing youth violence, the family mentorship dynamic should be a high priority in terms of resource allocation and evaluation.

VII. Neighborhood Empowerment

Organizations built around neighborhood empowerment foster a positive sense of community, and may act as viable substitutes for gang territoriality. An expansion of ongoing City support for neighborhood improvement projects could energize such efforts. In addition, Spanish-language events focused on “tools for a better future” could play a valuable role in strengthening families and communities alike. More could also be made of opportunities to celebrate the success stories in Latino communities, for example youths who turn their lives around and graduate. Various media vehicles could also be developed to extend the impact of these successes (e.g., print media, public radio and TV programming). Micro-businesses might also be developed at the Community Centers, thereby creating jobs and training opportunities for youths, as well as building community capital generally.

VIII. Substance Abuse and Mental Health

As with any segment of the South Coast population, the Latino population will have needs for substance abuse and mental health counseling. Economic hardship and cultural issues have negatively impacted the accessibility of existing services. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a great need to develop more services that are culturally effective (in terms of values, mores, and practices). In addition, Spanish-language access could be greatly improved. Until these changes take place, a crucial factor in the development of gang violence will go unchecked.

Summary

The South Coast is fortunate to have a diverse and committed base of leaders, administrators and service providers with extensive knowledge of, and ties to, local Latino communities. These people constitute a tremendous resource, and they are eager to contribute as the City and County undertake the anti-gang work. The discussions synthesized in this report confirm that significant, sustained change regarding gang-related violence may best be led by the Latino community itself. But having indicated such, the participants also offer specific and informed recommendations regarding how institutions on the South Coast could take crucially important steps to help facilitate the anti-gang effort. The cornerstone for this work involves finding ways to strengthen Latino families, an endeavor that will require coordination among agencies and clear metrics for measuring performance.